

Blind Ambition to make streets safer

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Shocking stories of first-hand experiences of navigating hazards for the visually impaired community were something of a wake-up call for Street Works UK chief executive Clive Bairsto and the start of a partnership to make life safer for all road users.

“We’ve had people who have fallen into holes because of inadequate barriers and poor signing, lighting, guarding,” Bairsto said.

Three years ago, at a meeting with highway groups in Scotland, Bairsto was shocked that such incidents would even happen.

“I thought, surely it couldn’t be true that there were partially sighted people falling into manholes. It made us recognise the serious problem, and then the discussion widened to other accessibility issues.”

This was how Street Works got to know Blind Ambition, the organisation run by Seema Flower that champions accessibility and equity for visually-impaired and differently-abled people in everyday life as well as workplaces.

Flower’s organisation is a disability inclusion consultancy that offers visual awareness training for workplaces, including infrastructure providers and contractors, among its services.

“Those are unforgivable mistakes that people should be taken to court for and fined or imprisoned, if they’re not doing the right thing in those areas,” Bairsto said. These indeed would be classified as criminal offences but risks for pedestrians remain and calls have been made for guidance to be tightened up.

Gangs working on streets must follow the Red Book from the Highways Authority and Utilities Committee (HAUC), set by the Department for Transport, which Bairsto and Flower explain is ripe for an update.

Currently the Red Book states that consideration should be given to those with visual impairments, wheelchairs or mobility scooters but lacks unequivocally stated requirements for anyone carrying out

street works to meet. The language is suggestive rather than explicit, Bairsto explained. This is an issue that both Street Works and Blind Ambition are pushing to change as the Red Book is in the process of being updated.

There are differences that may at first seem subtle, which will make significant safety improvements for people with restricted vision or mobility.

Flower said changes to firm up the wording will ensure considerations are not an afterthought. Currently, wording such as “consider” or “suggest” are not explicit enough, Flower said, and therefore inadequately followed or without standardisation.

Her organisation wants to see inclusions made for differently-abled pedestrians and road users. For example, using a temporary tactile pavement where works are being carried out, or tapping rails to be added as standard, rather than a suggestion.

Blind Ambition works to raise awareness within organisations about the hazards people may encounter, including those less obvious. For instance, at present people with limited hearing could miss warnings such as instructions from workers or sounds from machinery.

The organisation wants the Red Book update to require signage to be clear and highly visible for all users – including hearing impaired.

Flower explained the current guidance has limitations and does not fully address the need for tactile guidance for people to safely navigate hazards. She said that features that are suggested in existing guidance are often overlooked or not implemented effectively in practice, which leads to real-world problems for pedestrians with a visual impairment or other disability.

Both Bairsto and Flower were quick to point out that the reasons a member of public might struggle with roadworks might not be visible. The partnership between the two organisations includes advocacy for people with neurodivergence who could find disruption stressful or a significant hinderance to their day.

Flower said she has heard cost-related protestations to making accommodations. “I hear ‘oh we don’t have the budget to do that’, but they will have to have the budget if they are being sued. So why be waiting for something to happen?”

Since joining forces with Blind Ambition, Street Works has endeavoured to boost awareness of what Bairsto feels had been a major oversight.

“That was the genesis of a growing awareness. It was suddenly on all the Street Works meetings, everyone was talking about accessibility, partially sighted and people with impairments.”

Beyond that point, it became clear that there was a need to consider other groups of people and impairments in a broader sense.

Flower explained that the needs of different groups are varied. These could range from dyslexia making sign-reading more difficult, to neurodivergent individuals who rely on familiarity of the route from their front door. This, she pointed out, means disruption may be more impactful than neurotypical people.

Bairsto said the conversation has been opened up at the utility level with organisations, contractors and local authorities by HAUC including community as a core pillar in its most recent handbook.

“For the first time, it talks about building a skilled and diverse workforce; it talks about making street and road works inclusive, and tackling road worker abuse.”

This inclusion is a welcome step for what has been a hidden issue, according to Bairsto.

“The nature of street works is dealing with the underground world. It can be a little bit underground in companies too. These initiatives need to come all the way down to the shop floor – or street level –

because that's the visible part, that's how companies are seen. There's a lot on the agenda to address at board level, but that needs to be passed down."

Flower reinforced this and said: "Change needs to be top down".

"Culture is key, and changing attitude is really difficult in terms of perceptions around people who are vulnerable working in the street sector and in other corporate sectors as well."

Flower said more companies are working with Blind Ambition and she is keen for others to become involved in this crucial and often overlooked issue.